

HABS
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62-SAIPA,
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St. Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse
15 W. Kellogg Blvd
St. Paul
Ramsey County
Minnesota

HABS No. MN-32

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

Sept. 9, 1981

AMERICA'S CITY HALLS:

HABS No. MN-7

HABS

MINN

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The Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse
City of Saint Paul
Mayor George Latimer

NAME

The Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse

LOCATION

15 West Kellogg Boulevard. Bounded by Kellogg Boulevard, Fourth, Wabasha, and Saint Peter Streets. Entrances on Fourth Street and Kellogg Boulevard.

PRESENT OWNER, OCCUPANT AND USE

Ramsey County and City of Saint Paul. 35% city offices, 65% county offices.

SIGNIFICANCE

The Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse is a stunning example of innovative public architecture from the American Depression Era. Commissioned in 1930, and completed in 1931 by Holabird and Root of Chicago and Ellerbe and Company of Saint Paul, the City Hall design uses two Art Deco styles known as "American Perpendicular" and "Zigzag Moderne". The use of Art Deco styles and the incorporation of technologically advanced functional features in the new City Hall building make it a distinctively "modern" structure in the context of 1930's architecture. Art works which symbolically depict the progressive ideals of a modern industrial society add to the futuristic image of the architecture. Because it was constructed of the highest quality materials and is an excellent representative of a past style in the contemporary built environment, the City Hall is still considered an architectural masterpiece and a landmark in the city of Saint Paul. (~~Figure 1~~)

(MN-32-22)

I. HISTORICAL
INFORMATION

DATE OF ERECTION

By the mid-1920's, the old City Hall building at Fifth and Washington Streets could no longer accommodate the spatial needs of city and county offices. In 1928, a four million dollar public bond was approved for the erection of a new Courthouse and City Hall building. A nine member Advisory Courthouse and City Hall Commission was established in 1929 to direct the building project.

The first step toward 1931 completion of the new City Hall building was the purchase for \$500,000 of the block bordered by Wabasha, Third (Kellogg Boulevard), St. Peter, and Fourth Streets in the downtown area along the river. In addition, the Commission conducted a survey of courthouses in major U.S. cities to identify "how other cities have gone about the securing of architectural services for their new buildings, what type of buildings are being constructed, and the various architectural details of these buildings."¹

ARCHITECT

The Commission resolved to appoint a Saint Paul architect to be associated with an architect of national reputation. All Saint Paul architects were sent a letter outlining the project, and a number of non-resident architects were invited to appear before the Commission. At its meeting of February 3, 1930, the Commission selected Holabird and

Root of Chicago and Ellerbe and Company of Saint Paul to work jointly on the project. Holabird and Root was responsible for the basic design of the structure; Ellerbe and Company, working under the supervision of Holabird and Root, detailed the Holabird and Root design. (~~Figure 2~~)

(MN-32-21)

BUILDER, CONTRACTOR, SUPPLIERS

The contract for the construction of the Saint Paul City Hall was awarded to Foley Brothers of Saint Paul. After much disagreement between the architects and construction company over the quality and cut of the stone, Indiana Limestone was used for the building. (See Appendix A)

ORIGINAL PLANS AND CONSTRUCTION

The architects' drawings for the Saint Paul City Hall project are located at the Northwest Architectural Archives, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

ALTERATIONS AND ADDITIONS

The original appearance of the Saint Paul City Hall has not been altered. Double thermopane glass was installed on all outside windows to minimize heating and cooling losses. The new windows match the appearance of the original windows and were approved by the State Historic Preservation Officer.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The project to build a new city hall was initiated shortly before the 1929 stock market crash. In the years following the crash, construction projects were often changed in order to cut costs and appease the general public. The economic situation did not result in cost trimming changes on the proposed Saint Paul City Hall. Drops in labor and material costs, and the availability of master craftsmen more than compensated for most budget costs. In fact, the City Hall building, complete with furnishings and art work, cost only \$3,800,000 - \$200,000 less than the original bond. (Figure 3)

(MN-32-19,

II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION OF EXTERIOR

The most outstanding features of Holabird and Root and Ellerbe and Company's design for the new Saint Paul City Hall were an efficient and practical plan, the incorporation of technologically advanced functional features, and the expression of these modern functional concerns in the non-traditional Art Deco style. Primary considerations for the structure, as set forth by the Advisory Commission, were accommodating "the practical necessities", and ".....clothing those necessities with a simple but dignified exterior".² Using information gathered in an analysis of the spatial needs of city and county offices, Holabird and Root devised a plan in which offices that dealt heavily with the public were located on the main floor of the building, and other related departments were grouped on upper floors. The Holabird and Root design also made possible highly efficient use of space. Over 70% of the interior is usable work space, compared to 30% usable space in the Minnesota State Capitol building.

Specific functional features of the City Hall also suggest its designers' interest in constructing a building that was "modern" in its time. Elevators in the building were the most modern and speedy available in 1930. All clocks were originally controlled from a masterboard in a "pent-house" that also held a 60-gallon dispenser which automatically filled all restroom soap glasses. Features such as these not only gave the City Hall building a distinctively modern image in the 1930's, but also allow it to continue to be used in its original capacity without major alterations.

The concern for modernity suggested by functional features of the Saint Paul City Hall is clearly expressed in the stylistic appearance of the building. Holabird and Root and Ellerbe and Company's design disregards the classical motifs of the Beaux Arts style, using instead an American Art Deco style called "American Perpendicular".³ In contrast to the eclecticism characteristic of earlier architecture, the American Perpendicular style was considered futuristic in the 1920's and 1930's. This new style can be traced to the work of Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. In 1922, Saarinen entered the Chicago Tribune Competition with a design for a "styleless" skyscraper composed of severe geometric massing and sharp setbacks. Saarinen's design, though not chosen, was

highly regarded and led to a new appreciation for non-eclectic, modern skyscraper architecture.

The exterior of the Saint Paul City Hall reflects the American Perpendicular style which evolved from designs like that of Saarinen. The structure is a symmetrical massing of severe geometric forms of smooth-faced, coursed Indiana limestone, sparsely decorated with low flat reliefs of the same material. A three-story base with setbacks surrounds a central twenty-story tower which has further setbacks at its top. The three-story base and tower have vertically aligned rows of windows linked between stories by plain, flat, black spandrels. Flat vertical courses of limestone separate the bays. These alternating strips of dark windows and spandrels, and lighter tone limestone give the structure a dramatic, soaring appearance. (Figures--4 and 5)

(MN-32-1, MN-32-4)

The primary entrances to City Hall on Third and Fourth Streets are decorative focal points on the exterior of the structure. The Fourth Street entrance is a three-story block recessed between graduated one and two-story projections, all placed symmetrically in front of the twenty-story tower. A row of five glass doors and surmounting decoration are framed within the setbacks by two shallow three-story limestone projections. The placement of the doors within the recess and between these graduated flanking masses creates a ceremonial-like transition from the urban street into the interior of the City Hall building. (Figure 6)

(MN-32-2)

Above the doors of the Fourth Street entrance is a panel identifying the structure as the "Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse", and a relief by sculptor Lee Lawrie, who also made sculptures for the Nebraska State Capitol, the RCA Building, and other buildings in Rockefeller Center. Both the style and content of Lawrie's relief express the progressive ideals of the city and county that are also implied by the stripped down, modern appearance of the City Hall building itself. For the Fourth Street entrance, Lawrie has used a hard-edged flat relief style to schematically portray a group of figures at a street crossing. Lawrie's animated treatment of the scene, and his inclusion of a variety of figures indicate his perception of the dynamic quality of urban life, and the diversity within the urban populus. Images of a policeman directing traffic, workers carrying axes, a mail carrier, and a newspaper boy convey the importance

of labor in the 1930's. A traffic light, an automobile, and a fire hydrant are also included to indicate the benefits of modern technology to the urban dweller. (Figure 8) Above the street crossing relief, a tall narrow window flanked by vertical flutes runs up to a relief of a monumental female figure symbolizing "Liberty". Though carved in the same "modern", angular, geometric style as the figures in the street crossing scene, the figure's formal frontal pose, crown, and open book with the inscriptions, "VOX POPULI" and "JUS CIVILE" reflect ties to the traditional imagery for government ideals. ~~(Cover photograph)~~ (holding 2 tablets)

(MN-32-2, Close-up of figure just below major set-back, facing left)
The lower three-story masses to the sides of the Fourth Street entrance also have limestone relief decorations which continue around the building at street level. Fretwork ornaments the top edges of the one-story projections, and a series of three small reliefs of city, county, and state emblems is repeated around the entire building below the fretwork. The City of Saint Paul is represented by a crown and Roman sword; Ramsey County is represented by a depiction of the washstand on which Governor Ramsey wrote the territorial proclamation, and the scroll of proclamation; the state of Minnesota is represented by an eight pointed image of the North Star.

The other main entrance to the Saint Paul City Hall is located on the opposite side of the building on Third Street. The Third Street entrance is a three-story limestone proscenium-like projection from the main twenty-story tower. A row of five glass doors is set into the projection and surmounted by a silver glazed glass screen in the form of three large flutes. Two limestone reliefs by Lee Lawrie flank the doors of the entrance. Much like the Fourth Street reliefs, the imagery and style of the reliefs of the Third Street entrance reflect both the ideals of a modern industrial society, and institutional ties to more traditional, abstract government ideals. (Figures 9-11) -

(MN-32-5, 23, 6)
In the left relief, civic government is symbolized by a goddess figure wearing a mural crown (the emblem of civic society) and holding a staff with two entwined serpents in her right hand. In her left hand she holds balanced scales with the inscription, "LAW AND ORDER". Images of "modern" urban ideals surrounding the goddess are an open book, a nail keg, and cogged wheels inscribed respectively, "EDUCATION", "COMMERCE", AND "INDUSTRY". A panoramic view of the city of Saint Paul, including the new City Hall building, is depicted behind the goddess.

(Figure 12)
(MN-32-7)

The pendant relief panel to the right of the Third Street entrance symbolizes rural life in Ramsey County. A female figure holding a scythe over a bundle of wheat inscribed "AGRICULTURE", and a cornucopia inscribed "ABUNDANCE" is set in front of a schematized landscape of pine trees, mountains, and a rising sun. Also included is a train with the banner, "TRANSPORTATION", presumably symbolizing ties between city and country made possible by modern technology. Outside the doorway projection on the wall surface of the main tower are two additional relief panels. A sculpture of a calumet on the right symbolizes peace, and balanced scales on the left represent justice. (Figure 13)

(MN-32-8)

DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR

In contrast to the stark monochromatic American Perpendicular exterior, the interior of the Saint Paul City Hall was designed in the more jazzy, ornate "Zigzag Moderne" style of Art Deco. Zigzag Moderne is directly derived from the 1925 Paris exhibition, "L'Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Moderns". In France, the style which evolved from the exhibition was characterized by soft ornamentation, sensuous curves, and curlicues. As the trend became popular in the United States, the influences of machine simplicity and mass production gave rise to the more angular Zigzag style.

Memorial Hall, located directly inside the Fourth Street entrance, is the most striking interior space in the City Hall building, and also an extraordinary example of "Zigzag Moderne" interior design. This black marble-walled hall measures approximately 85 by 21 feet and extends upward three stories. Black marble piers running from the white marble floor to the gold leaf ceiling form side aisle arcades on the main floor and galleries at the second and third story levels. Waist-high screens of flat brass strips separate the galleries from the main hall. Brass is also used in cylindrical shafts with recessed lights at their bottoms, set into the marble piers. (Figures 14-18)

(MN-32-11, 12, 13, 24, 25)

At the end of Memorial Hall, opposite the Fourth Street entrance, is the famous three-story onyx statue, the "Indian God of Peace", by Swedish sculptor Carl Milles. Treated in an angular schematized style similar to that characteristic of the Lawrie reliefs, this massive Indian god holds a peace pipe in his left hand and is surrounded by five huddled kneeling figures. Indian symbols decorate the back of the main figure's headdress. To allow viewing from all sides, the statue was placed on a turntable that gradually rotates from side to side. The effect of the sculpture in its Memorial Hall setting is so dramatic that architectural historian David Gebhard has described the Hall as a place in which ".....the bringing together of theatre and architecture characteristic of the 1920's is fully realized".⁴ (~~Figures 19-21~~)

(MN-32-12, 13, 14)

Holabird and Root and Ellerbe and Company originally planned Memorial Hall without sculptural decoration; however, after the City Hall had been completed, Thomas Ellerbe decided that the addition of a colossal sculpture at the south end of the Hall would make the space much more dynamic. Ellerbe first contacted Paul Manship, a nationally known sculptor who was originally from Saint Paul. Manship was unable to accept the commission so Carl Milles was contacted. Milles accepted the commission, agreeing to a budget of \$100,000.

Milles' first design was for a sculpture of Saint Paul, in whose honor the city was named. However, the height of the space required the figure to be so grossly elongated that the design was rejected by the Advisory Commission. A second design for a "Father of Waters" figure (symbolizing the Mississippi River) was also rejected because it required glass materials which were, at the time, impossible to manufacture.

During the period of Milles' initial design submissions, the public voiced objection to spending city funds on the statue. In an effort to gain support for the project, the Advisory Commission decided to name the hall a "War Memorial", and to dedicate the hall and statue to Ramsey County soldiers killed in World War I. Milles' next submission was thus a nude male figure, meant to symbolize youth returning from war. Milles explained his model to a group of mothers of Veterans of Foreign Wars as a "Peace Memorial", instead of a war memorial. The women reacted negatively to the peace image; they preferred a representation of a strong war hero, such as a weary soldier.

Milles was outraged, claiming that he was a pacifist and would have no part in constructing a war memorial. For several months he ignored the statue commission.

During this time, Milles witnessed a pow-wow at an Indian reservation in the American West. Huddled around a smoking fire, a group of Indians was commemorating the "God of Peace". The image had such a strong impact on Milles that he decided to use it for his City Hall statue. ~~(Figure 22)~~
(MN-32-20)

The rich marble paneling and art work which decorate Memorial Hall are representative of the lavish materials and quality craftsmanship used throughout the City Hall building. Terrazzo stone, marble, and wood imported from 16 different countries cover walls and floors in many areas of the structure. (See Appendix B) Original art works, incorporated into the extravagant decor, add to the rich quality of the interior. The use of such exquisite materials was possible primarily because the City Hall was constructed in the years immediately following the stock market crash, when supplies and labor were exceptionally cheap.

(MN-32-38,37,39)

The third floor Council Chambers, decorated with English Oak and California Walnut panelling, and four murals by John Norton, is similar to Memorial Hall in its combination of expensive materials and original art work. ~~(Figures 23-25)~~ Norton, who is best known for his association with Prairie School architects, Purcell and Elmslie, used a painting style now known as "PWA Moderne" to symbolically depict the founding and growth of City of Saint Paul. The east wall has scenes of an Indian leading a white hunter down a river in a canoe, Indians and white men signing a peace treaty, and missionaries teaching Indians ~~(Figures 26-27)~~; the west wall murals show white men building railroads and buildings, and a surveyor, black porter, and woman with her husband. ~~(Figures 28-30)~~ The murals emphasis on industrial labor and stereotypical symbols for the history of the city make them stylistically and thematically similar to the Lee Lawrie reliefs on the exterior of the City Hall building.

(MN-32-15,18)

(MN-32-36,17,16)

Similar themes of history and industrial growth characterize relief sculptures on elevator doors in the first floor lobby. The artist, E.R. Stewart, has used a simplified flat relief style to portray an Indian and teepee, a

black slave working along the Mississippi, a farmer, factory, train and bunsen burner, a worker carrying a power tool, and the City Hall building itself. (~~Figures 31-32~~)

(MN-32-29,28)

The entire City Hall building is decorated with distinctively 1930's Deco style details. Door handles and light fixtures throughout the structure, the sculpted bronze eagle on the mailbox of the first floor lobby and the flexwork on departmental signs are designed specifically to suit the Deco theme of the building. Even stair railings and washroom fixtures reflect the mechanized stylization characteristic of Art Deco design.

(~~Figures 33-40~~)

(MN-32-32,33,34,35,27,30,26,34)

The fact that the Saint Paul City Hall and Ramsey County Courthouse has been maintained as originally constructed, and continues to serve the purpose for which it was built, is testimony to its functional and artistic value. The combination of exquisite detailing, quality craftsmanship, rich materials, and original art works in a design which expresses the aesthetic and cultural ideals of an era, gives the Saint Paul City Hall a unique historic and architectural significance. It stands as both a monument to the city of Saint Paul, and a masterpiece in American Art Deco design.

III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS

The architects' drawings are in the Ellerbe Collection at the Northwest Architectural Archives.

EARLY VIEWS

Photographs of the exterior and interior of the Saint Paul City Hall are at the Bloomington office of Ellerbe and Company, and at the Minnesota Historical Society.

Photographs of construction, some interior views, sculptor Carl Milles, and corner stone ceremony are at the Minnesota Historical Society.

PRIMARY SOURCES

"Advisory Court House and City Hall Building Commission Minutes" are at the Minnesota Historical Society Research Center.

SECONDARY SOURCES

"Big John", Twin Cities, November, 1978, pp. 13-14.

"Board Charges Inferior Work on Courthouse", St. Paul Pioneer Press, October 1, 1933.

"City of Saint Paul and Ramsey County Courthouse", St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press, September 26, 1976.

"Cubic Ft. Cost of City Hall Termed Low", St. Paul Dispatch, December 7, 1932.

"\$850,000 Saved in Building of New City Hall", St. Paul Dispatch, November 16, 1932.

Gebhard, David and Tom Martinson. A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, p. 84.

Nelson, Carole. "Too much quality to throw out", St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press, September 26, 1976.

Smith, Dane. "Architect Ellerbe made his mark in every state", St. Paul Pioneer Press, January 4, 1981.

"Way to Finance City War Memorial Outlined", St. Paul Dispatch, February 12, 1930.

"Where Beauty and Utility Meet", St. Paul Dispatch, February 12, 1930.

APPENDIX A: SUBCONTRACTORS

STONE

The general contractor, Foley Brothers of Saint Paul, contracted Indiana limestone for the exterior of the Saint Paul City Hall building. The first shipment of stone was rejected by the architects, who claimed it was of inferior quality to that requested. The Advisory Commission supported the architects despite Foley Brothers' argument that the stone was the highest quality available, and that quarrying new stone would add considerably to the cost of the building. Foley Brothers eventually took back the original stone and sued the city for \$175,000. The city won the suit and Foley Brothers was ordered to pay \$125,000 to the city.

FURNITURE

New furniture for the Saint Paul City Hall was custom designed for the building. Studies were made to assess the type and amount of new furniture required, and some furniture from the old courthouse was re-used in the new building. Contracts for new furniture were awarded to the following firms:

Adam Decker Hardware Company (cabinet work)
Van Duyne-Moran Company
Sperry Office Furniture
H.C. Boyeson Company (benches)

LIGHT FIXTURES

Walter E. Warren and Company

CARPET AND DRAPERY

Golden Rule Company
Hauenstein and Burmeister Company (shades)

APPENDIX B: SOURCES OF
WOODS

Quartered Red Birch	North Central U.S.
Plain Red Oak	Central & Southern U.S.
Quartered White Oak	Central & Southern U.S.
Butternut	North Central States
American Walnut	Central & Southern States
Maple	North Central States
Prima Vera	Coastal Mexico
English Brown Oak	England
Teak	India, Burma and Siam
Avodire	West coast of Africa
Oriental	Northern Queensland
Koa	Hawaiian Islands
Blackwood	Australia
African Mahogany	Africa
Tasmanian Oak	Tasmania
Mexican Mahogany	Mexico
Cuban Mahogany	Cuba
Honduras Mahogany	Central America
Austrian Oak	Central Europe
California Walnut	California
East Indian Rosewood	India
French Walnut	France
Laurel	India
Amipera	Western Africa
Peroba	South America

NOTES

¹Advisory Commission Minutes, November 4, 1929.

²Advisory Commission Minutes, August 13, 1930.

³Cass Gilbert's 1905 Minnesota State Capitol building exemplifies the traditional Beaux Arts style.

⁴David Gebhard, A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 84.

PREPARED BY SETH LEVIN AND SUSAN EBNER, UNDER THE SUPERVISION
OF TERRY PFOUTZ, CITY PLANNER, CITY OF SAINT PAUL, HERITAGE
PRESERVATION COMMISSION

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